Devil's Breath: Urban Legend or the World's Most Scary Drug?

Next time someone tries to hand you a business card, should you think twice before grabbing it?

Some would say "yes". There are stories circulating that a chemical known as "Devil's Breath" is making its way around the world, being blown into faces and soaked into business cards to render unsuspecting tourists incapacitated. The result? A "zombie-like" state that leaves the victim with no ability to control their actions, leaving them at risk of having their bank accounts emptied, homes robbed, organs stolen, or raped by a street criminal. Are these sensationalized stories part of an urban legend or a factual crime scene?

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Devil's Breath is derived from the flower of the "borrachero" shrub, common in the South American country of Colombia.

- The seeds, when powdered and extracted via a chemical process, contain a chemical similar to scopolamine called "burandanga". Borrachero has been used for hundreds of years by native South Americans in spiritual rituals.
- The compound is said to lead to hallucinations, frightening images, and a lack of free will. Amnesia can occur, leaving the victim powerless to recall events or identify perpetrators.
- According to a 1995 Wall Street Journal article, about half of all emergency room admissions in Bogota, Colombia were for burundanga poisoning. Scopolamine is also present in Jimson Weed (*Datura stramonium*), a plant found in most of the continental U.S.

This street drug is available in prescription form, too. If you suffer from seasickness, maybe you've used scopolamine (Transderm Scop) on your last ocean adventure. The active ingredient is available in a 1 milligram transdermal patch worn behind your ear to help ward off motion sickness or postoperative nausea and vomiting. The medicine slowly absorbs through the skin from a specialized rate-controlling membrane found in the patch. It's worn for three days before being replaced. The low dose and slow absorption helps to prevent severe side effects in most people. Scopolamine transdermal patch is not classified by the DEA as a controlled substance.

Controlled substance or not, there could be true illegal use of the drug. High doses or spiked drinks could cause issues. The State Department notes on their website that scopolamine can render a victim unconscious for 24 hours or more. In Colombia, where its use seems to be most widespread, "unofficial estimates" of scopolamine events are at roughly 50,000 per year. In large doses it can cause "respiratory failure and death". However, these effects are due to oral administration in "liquid or powder form in foods and beverages", not being blown into one's face or absorbed via a piece of soaked paper. Not surprisingly, the majority of these Colombian incidents have occurred in night clubs and bars, reminiscent of the date-rape drug Rohypnol.

Pharmacologically, scopolamine is classified as an anticholinergic medication and belladonna alkaloid.

- Side effects like dry mouth, blurred vision, headache, urinary retention, and dizziness can occur even at the low dose used in the transdermal patch.
- Overdoses can lead to a dangerous fast heart rate, dilated pupils, toxic psychosis, confusion, vivid hallucinations, seizures or coma, among other events.
- Use with alcohol is warned against in the official FDA package labeling. Combining it with alcohol,

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as in a spiked drink, or with other sedative drugs would certainly hasten central nervous system depression. Confusion, disorientation, excitability, and amnesia could occur with oral consumption.

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Immediate "zombie-like" side effects by blowing it into someone's face seems unlikely, from a pharmacologic standpoint. Others have also questioned the reports of robberies taking place when the powder is blown into someone's face or placed on a business card.

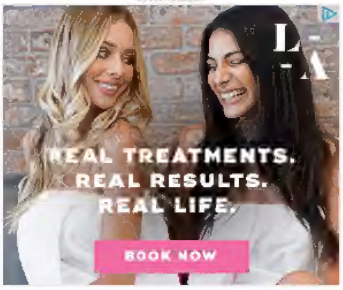
Accounts of scopolamine being used worldwide are available. In Paris a report from Newsweek Europe surfaced that elderly people were being targeted by a Chinese international network. The U.S. State Department also warns on its website that travelers to Colombia may be at risk of robbery due to criminals using a variety of drugs, not just scopolamine.

Medical case reports have been published of women from London having prolonged headaches after possible clandestine scopolamine exposure. Reports of illegal use of scopolamine in the U.S. are available, but unsubstantiated. The reliability of these all of these reports are difficult to confirm.

Nonetheless, these news stories highlight an important travel point. To prevent assault due to scopolamine -- or any drug for that matter -- follow these rules, as recommended by the U.S. State Department:

- Never leave food or drinks unattended when traveling.
- Do not accept food or drinks from strangers or new acquaintances.
- Travel in a large group when possible, and don't leave with a stranger.
- Always check the State Department's crime and safety warnings before traveling to a foreign country.
- Seek medical assistance immediately if you believe you have been drugged.

Is Devil's Breath actually scopolamine, an urban legend, or some other drug being used to incapacitate tourists? Maybe it's a combination of all three. Urban legend or not, the use of drugs to incapacitate, rob or rape victims can and does happen domestically and internationally. Because of that, a dose of good sense should always be used to avoid being poisoned, whether traveling abroad or just going out for the night in your own hometown.



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Sources

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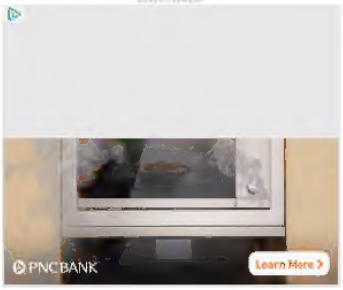

Further information

Always consult your healthcare provider to ensure the information displayed on this page applies to your personal circumstances.

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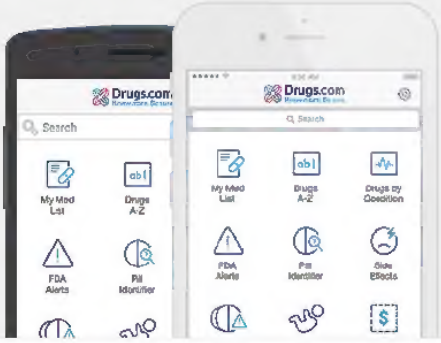

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